Historical geography, climbing and mountaineering: route setting for an inclusive future

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Abstract:
This article seeks to review work broadly defined as the historical geographies of mountaineering and climbing. As such it outlines the links between mountaineering, colonialism and vertical ascent as well the historical geographies of rock climbing which speak to the culture, practices, and technologies of climbing. In outlining past work particular attention is paid to the hidden and gendered histories of climbing and mountaineering. This moves discussion beyond common place tales of white privilege and Western philosophies of conquer through ascendancy to tackle the broader ways by which mountaineering and climbing have been explored by academic geography. A holistic appreciation of work on this topic, it is argued, can not only help the Geographical discipline to deal with its colonial past, but also show how the historical geographies of mountaineering and climbing fit within efforts to decolonise the discipline, include wider voices and utilise archives unknown.

Introduction

Mountains have long fascinated geographers. From Humbolt's *Cosmos* to the recent monograph *Mountain* by Veronica Della Dora, these works offer a wonderful historical geography of verticality. This research, and much like it, has explored the ways in which humans have interacted with mountain spaces, sought to understand them, picture them, and ultimately conquer them. Crucially for this article to 'conquer' a mountain, you have to climb it. This concept of climbing and mountaineering as a means of conquering space has, until recently, dominated the academic literature on these activites. This article therefore seeks to demonstrate a more holistic account of work on these sporting scapes and highlight the ways in which geographies of climbing and mountaineering can tell us more about land and landscape, leisure and practice. In doing so it highlights the ways in which writing on these activities can be part of the move within historical geography to attend to women's history and the means by which historical geography can contribute to both the practice and sensory turn. Moreover, there is useful space for future work on mountaineering and climbing to play an active role in decolonising the geographical discipline. This review paper therefore tackles first the link between understanding mountains and climbing them, combining within this a focus upon exploration, colonialism and solo ascendancy. An overview of rock climbing is then proffered which highlights not only the divergent histories of these two leisure scapes, but also the means by which climbing gives space for discussion of the New Cultural Geographies understanding of landscape as text which appeared in the 1990s. Latterly discussion turns to gender in seeking to forefront existing historical works attending to female climbers and mountaineers. Finally, these discussions are pulled together as thoughts turn to the future, and space is made for work attending to race, gender, and practice-focused geographies.

Mountains, colonialism and vertical ascent.

Much of the history of climbing and mountaineering can be found within climbing literatures but there is also excellent research to be found within the Humanities which situates these understandings and outlines their broader significance in the creation of knowledge. Academic literature on mountaineering and climbing is heavily interwoven with work on the conceptualisation of mountains. Schama's (1996) *Landscape and Memory* provides a detailed account of early mountain sensibilities, detailing the shift from mountains as places of fear to the enlightenment, when mountains came to be seen as '. . . the beginning and the end of all natural scenery' (Ruskin 1856:353). In Della Dora's (2016) *Mountain* she uniquely switches the focus to ask what mountains themselves have given to themes such as 'vision', 'time', and 'science and technology'. Both of these books are inspired, in part, by the practice of mountaineering which, to a large extent, shaped understandings of vertical spaces throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. They utilise examples such as Professor Horace Benedict de Saussure's patronage of the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 as a conduit between science and mountains. This equation of mountains as 'Nature's greatest laboratory' (Cockayne in Johnston and Pawson 1994:175) legitimised climbing as the search for knowledge and collectively these writings detail the subsequent move from scientific endeavour to active pastime, with the Alps becoming, in Stephen's words, *The Playground of Europe* (1871).

Scholars have also critically researched the links between geography, mountaineering and imperialism, and in doing so made wider cultural and political connections between travel, exploration and empire. This particularly relates to the 'golden age' of mountaineering between the 1850's and 60's. As Hansen notes, '[a]nchoring the history of geography and other disciplines in their political context has been part of a broader reassessment of the role of academic knowledge in constituting imperial power…' (2013:48). Through this lens, climbing, and in particular mountaineering, has long been understood as 'an exercise in vertical colonialism' (Schama 1996:423). The figures are important - between 1854 and 1882 British climbers 'claimed' 31 out of the 39 reported first ascents in the European Alps (Johnston and Edwards, 1994: 462). Where once mountain scenery was associated with fear, chaos and doom by, notably, Western audiences, climbing and mountaineering marked the way for vertical ascent as accolade (Flemming 2000). As Schama (1996:423) remarks, some knew 'what would become a commonplace in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: that the possession of a mountaintop was a title to lordship' as 'conquest transferred prestige from the mountain to the climber' (Hansen 1995:317). Scholars have therefore highlighted that, although George Mallory's infamous claim of 'because it was there' has received great attention in evidencing the lure of the mountain, there is indeed a much more complicated relationship of nationalism, colonialism, and masculinity at play in the history of mountaineering.

Hansen (1996) and Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010) provide prime examples of these connections. In turning his attention to the experiences of British mountaineers on the boundaries of Europe and empire from the 1860s to the First World War, Hansen highlights how mountaineering became embroiled

within debates of race and national boundaries. Arguing that the sporting figures involved 'described the Caucuses with the language of sport and the poetics of imperial power' (1996:48) this paper charts how self/other mapped onto here/there in creating the boundaries of empire. Debarbieux and Rudaz focus upon 'the processes by which societies construct their mountains' (2010:2) and through in-depth scholarship make a strong argument for mountains as 'political objects' (2010:282), with the creation of the mountaineer as key to the creation of national imaginaries. In a contrasting vein, more recent scholarship by Bainbridge (2016:43) has argued for the Victorian 'invention' of the Dolomites through a 'more ethnographic than imperialistic, more feminine than masculine [and] more artistic than sporting' engagement with mountain landscapes. Notions of conquer are, however, offered new voice in reference to the later practice of rock climbing as Taylor (2006) is keen to emphasise that this sense of claiming land did not stop with the conquering of the world's major peaks. In contemporary climbing culture, guidebooks act in a similar sense, delivering 'private property by proxy' through what Taylor (2006:213) terms 'a recreational deedbook'.

Focusing upon modernity, Hansen furthers his attention to mountaineering histories and geographies in his erudite cultural history of mountains, *Mountaineering Before the Enlightenment.* Although a historian by discipline Hansen's (2013) work is inherently spatial and offers a great deal to historical geography. By storying the discovery and first ascents of peaks such as Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, and Mount Everest, Hansen has sought to explain a 'particular strand of modernity in which modern man stands alone on the summit, autonomous from other men and dominant over nature' (2013:2). As Pottle notes, '[t]his aspiration to go upwards, and be the first, owes everything to the educative and liberating influence of the Enlightenment, and can be summarized with a twist on Mallory's immortal rationale: not so much 'because it is there' as 'because I am here" (2014:190).

An inherent outcome of this obsession with the individual is a resultant dearth of work on those people who were also there. Those support systems who aided Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary, as much as they assisted the renowned soloist Ueli Steck, are largely ignored in historical geographies of these 'assaults on the vertical' (Taylor 2006). There exists a small niche of work upon portering relations (MacDonald and Butz 1998) for adventure tourism, and Sherpa involvement in Everest expeditions (Ortner 1999), but there is certainly room for further excavation of the relationships developed amidst the mountains. While popular literature remains dominated by stories of (and by) white men, there have been moves to diversity beginning with Norgay and Ullman's *Man of Everest* (1956) and more recently Zuckerman and Padoan's *Buried in the Sky* (2012). Despite over twenty years of discussion in historical geography of the need to document wider perspectives through incorporation of the historical voices of those on the margins, it appears this had yet to impact on writings of vertical ascent. This is, however, not only a call for 'voices from the edge' (Pandey 1995:223) in Historical Geography more broadly but also an urging for a dismantling of selective silos built around academic writings of climbing achievements. There is no longer space for a singular narrative of great men [and it is usually men who are written of], these are group endeavors

and history should reflect this as pluralistic accomplishment.

Historical geographies of rock climbing

Following the swathe of literature attending to the historical geographies of mountain ascendancy in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, a small but ever-growing literature on rock climbing has emerged. Such work details the rise of rock climbing as a result of its peak-focused predecessor running out of virgin summits. Nettleford and Stratford (1999) argue that climbing emerged out of changes in mountaineering during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although it retained the key discourses of 'individualism, achievement and conquest… exploration and first ascents' (1999:134), the absence of 'virgin peaks' led the turn to rock. Rather than focus on the altitude or the summit, the accolade was now to be found in the 'route' via which you got there. While other disciplines focus on the health implications and psychology[1] of climbing, geographical works detail the culture, the practices, and the technologies of climbing.

Taylor (2006) in particular discusses rocks as climbing landscapes and uses an historical approach to examine climbing guide books in Yosemite Valley, USA. This work tackles the ways in which landscapes can be read, represented, and controlled. In Taylor's article guidebooks become, as previously stated, 'recreational deedbooks' and 'a weird form of private property by proxy' (2006:213). In attending to such details Taylor brings climbing to bear on the geography of books, extending the subfield through a novel form of book. As such this work adds to the rising body of research within historical geography (Hunt 2017, Lorimer 2003) which seeks to engage in methodological debates which muddy and energise the conventional list of sources available to the historical geographer.

Working earlier than Taylor (2006), Nettlefold and Statford (1999) brought a New Cultural Geographies inspired lens to the sport in exploring climbing landscapes-as-texts. As such they talk of climbing crags as landscapes which accumulate meaning through the grading of rock and as such can be read for the relationships they have with climbing society. As they state, at this point 'the interrelationships between climbers and the environment [had not] been explored in any detail' (1999: 130). Whether recognised at the time or not, this article also touches on some of the later more practice-based accounts of rock climbing. Work such as Rickley (2017), Barratt (2011, 2012) and Lewis (2000) have since attended to the more fleshy, bodily encounters with rock climbing in detailing the ways in which climbing bodies make space both on and off the rock. These articles tend away from historical geography, but there is room for historical geographers to contribute to these debates. Della Dora's (2008) work on *Mountains and Memory* provides a useful exemplar as it traces the

[1] See A.D.Fave, M.Bassi and F.Massimini, 'Quality of Experience and Risk Perception in High- Altitude Rock Climbing', *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 15, 2003, pp. 82–98; D.J.Llewellyn and X.Sanchez, 'Individual Differences and Risk Taking in Rock Climbing', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9, 2008, pp. 413–26.

connections between mountains and memory through nineteenth-century embodied visions of mountain. Future work focused upon guidebooks could pick up on bodily practice - just as these are guides to read rock, they also prescribe how to move upon it.

An obvious future to research on rock climbing comes from a focus on indoor climbing walls. As Naylor (2008) highlights in his *Progress* paper on 'geographies and historiographies', historical geographers have become, borrowing Pearson's words' 'enthralled by the 'lure of the local'' (2006:4 in Naylor 2008:271). The introduction and ascendancy of the plastic frontier of contemporary climbing clearly lends itself as a new route for 'small story' (Lorimer 2003) research. There has already been some work on indoor climbing space. Eden and Barratt (2010) have used indoor climbing walls to highlight the changing expectations of environmental leisure. However, the historical component to their discussion is limited to the following: 'Purpose-built indoor climbing walls first appeared in university gymnasiums in the 1970s and have proliferated: the British Mountaineering Council lists 280 climbing walls in its 2009 directory' (2010: 490). Clearly there is room for further historical accounts of this form of leisure particularly given such indoor walls are often sited in post-industrial buildings and warehouses which speak to the sited histories of interchanging work and leisure spaces. As Eden and Barratt (2010:493) themselves highlight, there is scope for further investigation of these seemingly 'mundane' domesticated environments which demand closer investigation 'rather than merely dismissing them as lacking adventure'.

Gendered histories of climbing and mountaineering

Historical geographies of climbing and mountaineering also require comment in terms of discussions around the selective gendering of history and the dearth of minority histories within historical geography more widely. Any review needs to acknowledge the call for historical work to engage with 'broader publics' and to help 'contemporary communities' in 'understanding their past(s) (DeLyser 2014:93). Public here refers to both society at large and the communities, overlapping as they might, of historical geographers and climbers.

Much of the existing literature focuses upon the 'genteel manhood' (Taylor 2006) of Victorian mountaineering and the subsequent 'hyper masculinity' where 'travel, constructed in opposition to dwelling, is seen as masculinized' (Frohlick 2006: 479; see also Clifford 1997 and McDowell 1999). As previously cited, Hansen highlights that histories of climbing are histories, 'in which modern man stands alone on the summit' (2013:2) and even in later work on rock climbing the focus remains on everyday masculinities (Hardwell 2011). Writings on mountains by mountaineers often sexualized these landscapes and, playing into the languages of colonialism, saw their achievements as virginal conquests (Kolodny 1975, Hansen 2013). The vertical world is thus depicted as a man's world, as Ortner (1999:217) argues, mountaineering is 'always in part about masculinity and manhood'. In particular, the biographical focus on figures such as Hillary, Mallory, Tenzing, and Royal Robins, and even the 'leading protagonists' of climbing's embodied history at southern England's Beachy Head (Gilchrist 2012), highlights this intrinsic masculinity (Taylor 2006).

Yet, as Frohlick (2006) highlights, women were active participants in Himalayan expeditions from the mid-twentieth century (and perhaps earlier), nonetheless their presence has been marginalised by the overwhelming male-ness of popularised mountaineering.

Despite this history it appears that women are seen as ‘‘Other’ in contrast to the fraternal geographies and normative white sporting bodies of the mountaineering hero’ (Frohlick 2006: 481). In charting gender relations though the lens of autobiographies Moraldo (2013) finds women to be ‘doubly deviant’, operating outside of normal gender roles on many levels. Frohlick takes this gendered argument further, disentangling the complex relationship between gender and risk when mothers and mountains meet, as she notes, ‘women’s experiences of mountaineering are mediated through dominant motherhood discourses’ (2006:478), yet male mountaineers can travel ‘largely without culpability as fathers’ (2006:478).

Where women do exist in mountaineering and climbing literatures they are often depicted as ‘gender radicals’ (Ortner 1999). In Ortner’s words ‘[t]o say that someone is a gender radical is to say that they are questioning or breaking gender rules’ (1999:17). This is certainly the case with Gugglberger’s (2017) depiction of Polish climber Wanda Rutkiewics. Frohlick (2004) also presents a biography of exceptionality when discussing Lhakpa Sherpa, the first Nepali woman to climb Everest in 2000. Her focus on the enactment of, rather than resistance, to globalisation sets up a discussion of the various feminized subjectivities of female climbers.

Not all accounts of women in this sportscape portray a radical vision. Taylor (2006:211) highlights that;

> Beverly Johnson, Barb Eastman, Sibylle Hectell (sic.), and Lynn Hill effectively destroyed many of the gender boundaries within the sport, and they killed the conceit that men were innately superior climbers.

Despite such equality, ‘what they did not change was the patriarchal bias’ (Taylor 2006:211). Rather, these and other women ‘regarded Yosemite’s Camp 4 as ‘the merry men in Sherwood Forest’, and … women joined the fraternity by internalizing its values’ (Taylor 2006:211). Rather than confirming Ortner’s notion of ‘gender radicals’, Taylor (2006:211) found that,

> for most of the sport’s history women have tended to share the socio-cultural background and values of their male counterparts, and usually they reinforced rather than challenged the sport’s classist and imperialistic impulses.

Gender is thus viewed through ‘the narratives of climbing and of self which women have produced’ (Rak 2007:112). This assertion of reinforcement, however, should not dampen the desire to research the historical geographies of women who climb. Inspired by critical methodological questions surrounding the analysis of film (Crang 1997; Kindon 2003), Brickell and Garrett (2012) focus on amateur filmmaking in the Himalayas to discuss the political intricacies

of geographical practice and filmmaking. They do this through the work of female mountaineer and amateur filmmaker Eileen Healey. Focusing on her footage of the 1959 first all-female ascent of Cho Oyu in the Himalayas, Brickell and Garrett pull out important points concerning the gendered differences in film accounts of mountaineering in that period, as well as highlighting the potential for unofficial archives to detail female experience. Where the male experience is historically found in 'formal' recordings of vertical accomplishment, the female experience may reside in attics, personal records, and other altogether less formal archival locations. Subsequently, feminist studies of climbing focused on women were, when Brickell and Garrett (2012:9) published, and are now, still rare. Learning from the work of Ashmore, Craggs, and Neate (2012) it thus appears it is in exactly this kind of scholarship that there is the opportunity for 'working-with' to find archives unknown, and in doing so re-emphasise 'the importance of place in archival research' (Ashmore et al. 2012:82).

There has recently been a surge in attention to women's histories across historical geography, pushed in no small part by the work of McDonagh (2016) and recognised recently in this journal by Moore (2018). There has also been a call to look at 'gender issues in mobilities' (DeLyser 2014:94). Given the rising impetus for historical geographies to explore the role played by women in history and mobilities it therefore seems anomalous that minimal attention has been given to the contribution of women to the history and practice of this form of activity, both as leisure and profession. This is particularly pointed given the rise of interest in in gendered perspectives of mountain encounters within academia through projects such as Keyton's *Into the Mountain.*

Eyeing the route: the next moves

At this point in the discussion I turn to the next moves and seek to offer thought and comment on where the geographies of both climbing and mountaineering could plan their next route. As highlighted above, there is clearly an imperative for historical geographies of climbing and mountaineering to attend further to issues of gender. This work could be, to quote McDonagh (2016:2), in reference to her recent monograph, 'about women whose contribution has often gone largely unrecognised, not only in the existing historiography, but in family histories, pedigrees and archive catalogues'. The push for action posited here is not confined to the output of academic work or confined to words on pages. While scholarly attention to the histories of women in climbing is undoubtedly welcomed, a clarion is also proffered for attention to the practicing of history, to the politics of the archive, and the stories that are chosen to be conserved. Undeniably what is required is focus on women at all levels in the production of knowledge within historical geography.

Another point of future departure is the potential for interdisciplinary explorations in this field. In addition to Keyton's work mentioned above, Pitches 'Performing Mountains' and Kakalis and Goetsch's (2018) recent edited collection *Mountains, Mobilities and Movement,* all point towards the potential for innovative attention to mountain 'inhabitation, interpretation and communication' (Goetsch and Kakalis 2018:4).

There is also an imperative for academic eyes to turn to the places in the world which have less storied histories of climbing and mountaineering. As highlighted previously, this includes attention to the plurality of climbing history, to the falsity of the solo narrative and to the support mechanisms which historically facilitated and continue to effectuate many climbing experiences worldwide. This includes, but is far from limited to, the porters, partners, guides, medics, caterers, and accommodation providers.

In contemporary terms, as Ness highlights, the 'practitioner population' of the climbing community has its own 'sites of practice …on every continent' (2011:77). As she continues, some of the elite members of the climbing community occupy what Appadurai (1990, 2003) calls a 'translocal ethnoscape' as a result of their continuous movement 'both in virtual and in actual reality, between sites of practice in a variety of countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas' (Ness 2011:79). Subsequently, in addition to the attention paid in anthropology to the 'McDonalization of climbing' (Ness 2011:80) due to the proliferation of Western values through climbing practice, there remains a need to focus upon the mobilities of these sports, and the livelihoods, relationships, and communities which accompany them.

Yet, while such narratives would present important steps forward, they are not the only void in the existing research corpus. Where research has, with excellent results, focused on the ways in which climbers themselves construct outdoor spaces through their narratives, it remains focused on western voices (Wilson 2012). The continued focus upon white climbers, and the commercialisation of climbing practice proliferates the perception of the climber as white. Yet, this 'playscape' is not the possession of a singular white history. The first woman to summit Mount Everest was the Japanese Junko Tabei. The second was Phanthog, a Tibetan national. Yuji Hirayama from Japan is today one of the world's leading rock climbers. While Frohlick has written on the 'various formations of a feminized, racialized 'Third World' mountaineer' (2004:198) there remains a dearth of work which attends to the diverse histories, practices and subjectivities of this sporting-scape. It is, for example, picked out that '[n]ote has been given to women such as Mary Kingsley, who in 1895, whilst travelling in West Africa, made reference to her desire to be the first white person to ascend the highest mountain in the region' (Brickell and Garett 2013:9), and yet while it is noted that Kingsley is the 'first white person', the *first* person remains anonymous, in both race and name. Attention to more diverse stories in terms of place, nationality, and race are imperative to a more thorough and accurate reflection of the history and contemporary practice of climbing and mountaineering. Such a move would relocate the focus of geographic attention upon climbing and mountaineering away from the dominant discourses of exploration and conquer which currently bind the Geographic discipline to the perpetuation of a white and western narrative. Deterring such a false assembly of knowledge could do much to decolonise the trajectory of historical geography.

Conclusion

This review has sought to outline the existing work in the historical geographies of climbing and mountaineering. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a great deal that has been said in this field. These activities are, after all, profoundly geographical, incorporating travel and movement in vertical form. They embody an intimate coupling of social and physical space and they are, both in their past and present, global endeavours. This review has sought to detail the collective contribution of this work and account for past scholarship on both mountaineering and rock climbing, with a particular focus upon their hidden and gendered histories. There remains, nevertheless, possibilities for future work which could focus on gender, take an interdisciplinary approach, unpick the solo narrative and focus on non-western narratives. Part of this imperative lies in the fact that Geography, as a discipline, undoubtedly must continue to acknowledge and research its colonial past. The historical geographies of climbing and mountaineering have contributed much to this narrative, but scholarship must not stop there. Through developing the routes laid out above, these historical geographies have the potential not only to address the controversies of a Geographical past, but also shape a Geographical future.

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